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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [BO](#)  
SUBJECT: FORMER OPPOSITION MP SKREBETS CONVICTED

REF: A. (A) 04 MINSK 1214  
[1](#)B. (B) 05 MINSK 0022  
[1](#)C. (C) 05 MINSK 543  
[1](#)D. (D) 05 MINSK 601  
[1](#)E. (E) MINSK 0077  
[1](#)F. (F) 05 MINSK 661

Classified By: Classified by Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4(B,D  
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[1](#)1. (C) Summary: On February 14, the Supreme Court of Belarus convicted former Respublika MP Sergey Skrebets to 30 months in prison for allegedly obtaining bank loans through fraud. He was acquitted on charges of bribery and conducting illegal business activity. The nine months he spent in pre-trial detention will count towards his sentence. His brother, Aleksandr, was given a two-year suspended sentence and one year probation for the same charge. This conviction makes Skrebets Belarus' sixth long-term political prisoner. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Skrebets was elected to parliament in 2000. He quickly made his opposition to Lukashenko known and became one of the leaders of the small, pro-reform parliamentary faction Respublika. He attempted to run for president against Lukashenko in 2001, but was not allowed on the ballot after he failed to collect the needed 100,000 signatures. In the spring of 2003, during his annual address to parliament, Lukashenko accused Respublika of, "engaging in political games aimed at destabilizing the situation in society." Days later then prosecutor general (now head of Lukashenko's campaign) Viktor Sheyman opened a fraud case against Skrebets. Sheyman alleged that in 2001, Skrebets used fraud to obtain a USD 320,000 loan for his company BelBabayevsky Trading House, from Belarusbank. Skrebets denied all charges, and claimed he had quit the company to enter parliament before it obtained this loan.

[1](#)3. (C) In summer 2004 Skrebets and other Respublika members held an 18-day hunger strike protesting parliament's refusal to debate electoral reform. In October 2004 election officials claimed Skrebets had misstated his income and improperly collected signatures for his nomination, blocking him from running for reelection to parliament. The Central Election Commission again blocked him in February 2005 from running to fill a vacant seat in parliament, claiming 81 people recanted their nomination signatures for him. Skrebets unsuccessfully replied that all 81 were medical

students who had been threatened with eviction from their dormitory if they did not recant, and that their retractions were all written in the same handwriting. He tried to run for president in 2006, while in pretrial detention, but dropped out of the race without giving a reason (ref E).

¶4. (C) Skrebets was arrested on 15 May 2005 on charges of bribing a judge in a murder case (ref C). He was charged in August with fraud for the above loan to his business, and in September with illegally managing a company while serving as an MP. Skrebets denied all charges, and he was acquitted of the bribe and illegal activity charges. During the nine months he spent in pretrial detention, Skrebets staged four hunger strikes, the longest lasting 40 days, to protest his confinement. While in jail, authorities repeatedly denied his wife permission to visit him, including on his birthday.

#### Other Political Prisoners

¶5. (C) This conviction makes Skrebets Belarus' sixth political prisoner. (Note: Post is not counting the hundreds arrested for terms of less than a month.) They are:

Valery Levonevsky, sentenced in September 2004 to two years in prison for a satirical poem which the court ruled mocked Lukashenko (ref A). Levonevsky's partner, Aleksandr Vasilyev, received the same sentence, but was released in a general amnesty in July 2005.

Mikhail Marinich, arrested in April 2004, sentenced in December 2004 to 5 years in prison for allegedly stealing equipment from his own NGO (ref B). In August 2005, his sentence was reduced to 2 1/2 years.  
Nikolay Statkevich, sentenced in May 2005 to three years of internal labor exile (khimya), later reduced to two years, for organizing a protest in October 2004. He previously served a 10-day sentence for the same charge (ref D).

Pavel Severinets, sentenced in May 2005 to three years of internal labor exile (khimya), later reduced to two years, for organizing a protest in October 2004. He previously served a 15-day sentence for the same charge (ref D).

Andrey Klimov, sentenced in June 2005 to 18 months of internal labor exile (khimya) for organizing a protest in March (ref F).

In August, authorities released Professor Yuri Bandazhevskiy, jailed in 2001 allegedly for accepting a bribe. Many believe he was really jailed because his research findings on the consequences of the Chernobyl accident contradicted GOB policy.

#### Comment

¶6. (C) Post cannot comment on the veracity of the criminal charges against Skrebets. However, the pattern of events clearly indicates the GOB persecuted him as an opponent of Lukashenko. This conviction, coming just before the Central Election Commission announces the candidates for presidential elections, will no doubt serve as a warning to other members of the opposition.  
Krol